

# Gender Differences within Japanese Language Use in Comic Books<sup>1</sup>

by

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マンガにみる日本語の男女差

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1.1 There are, as Wardaugh (1986:316) points out, very clear ways in which the Japanese language defines gender roles but these differences are not necessarily the same as those to found in English or indeed any other language. Wardaugh suggests that no use is made within the language of the *he/she* type of pronoun distinctions to be found in English. In fact, to say that no use is made of them would be incorrect, Japanese does have and make use of the pronouns *kare* (kare)<sup>2</sup> and *kanojo* (kanojo) which have almost identical meanings, yet it is certainly true that it is possible to converse in Japanese without reference to these pronouns and they are indeed rarer than their English equivalents. Similarly, although his suggestion that "Japanese women show they are women when they speak...by the use of a sentence-final particle *ne*" is somewhat simplistic since men also use this particle even in informal conversation, his general point that there are major differences in the use of language is a valid one. We could perhaps qualify his statement by saying that Japanese women make far less use of the more strongly demonstrative equivalent of *ne* (ne): *na* (na) than men do, and that they tend to use the *ne* particle with intonation that would be considered effeminate if uttered by men.

1.2 It is not my intention in this paper to make an extended list with commentary of differences between the distributions of various words between the sexes of native Japanese speakers. Such a list can be gleaned from other sources including some textbooks of Japanese as a second language (see for example Mizutani and Mizutani 1977: 151) and the making of such a list would appear to be falling into the trap of 'butterfly collecting' that Wardaugh (1986: 17) quite rightly argues is unworthy of an academic field. Equally, there are important elements to the debate on gender within the field of sociolinguistics that while valid in themselves, will not be examined in detail within the current paper. The assertion for instance by Dale Spender (1980) that women occupy a 'negative semantic space' within the English language because of the negative connotations of the female side of numerous lexical pairs ('he's a professional', 'she's a

professional') is an important one, whether or not one accepts that this is a 'bad' feature of the language. It would be possible to search for numerous examples of negative semantic space in Japanese, yet the fact remains that we gain very little in terms of our understanding of the way the language operates by doing so. If we find even one example we do confirm that this phenomenon is present in non-European languages and we can draw some conclusions from this point. We may for example speculate that the similar feudalistic background of both Europe and Japan has led to the political dominance of the male as defender/fighter, and that this dominance has led to the association of male equivalents of certain words with strong/positive connotations and female equivalents with weak/negative connotations. However such conclusions would involve far more etymological and historical research than is unfortunately possible within the scope of the current paper. Suffice it to say that there are indeed examples of negative semantic space in Japanese and we can perhaps adequately illustrate this with two pairs of words.

1.3 Firstly, *musuko* (musuko) is the Japanese word for son while the female equivalent *musume* (musume) can mean both daughter and girl in a similar way to the French *garçon* and *filles*. The latter use of the word (meaning girl) is often mildly derogatory and tends to emphasise a girl's sexual attractiveness to older men rather than any other qualities she may possess. Secondly, the words *memeshii* (memeʃi:) and *o-shi* (o:ʃi:) meaning respectively womanly and manly carry quite different connotations, with the former often seen as a negative quality while the latter is a positive attribute.

1.4 Rather than continue this illustration, it might be more insightful to look at some examples of Japanese language in use and to examine the way in which gender roles are handled. I have chosen to do so through an examination of *manga* (manga) or comic books although again, limits of space will mean that it will be impossible to approach the degree of analysis undertaken by Kramer (1974) of cartoons in the New Yorker. Manga in Japan are popular among a large section of the population and according to Animato (Fall 1994) an animation enthusiasts' magazine, manga account annually for some \$3 billion in sales and sixty percent of all printed materials in Japan. Given the populist nature of the medium it is perhaps reasonable to speculate that the language and content of manga is easily identifiable by most ordinary Japanese, and that it may reflect both pictures of society and language that are typical in informal situations. It is for example unlikely that a manga such as 'Slam Dunk' about a high school basketball team would be as popular among high school students as it is, if the language and situations contained within it were outlandishly unrealistic. This is an assumption I shall make, although it is important to recognise the need to test such an assumption by empirical research.

1.5 I shall look at selected excerpts from the manga 'Slam Dunk' introduced above, which is one of the most popular manga among younger people. The comic is designed to be humorous as well as focusing on the excitement of sport by following the career of a first year high school student who takes up basketball (he happens to have great natural talent and a height approaching two

meters) in order to win the heart of a fellow student. Three excerpts will be considered, each of which could be said to represent a particular sub-field within Halliday's (1973) interactional function. All of them are necessarily brief extracts, however I hope that even such limited examples will illustrate some of the markings of gender roles and gender differences among Japanese youth.

1.6 In the first extract we see the hero, Hanamichi Sakuragi (*hanamitchi sakuragi*), being asked by the girl he has fallen in love with (Haruko: *haruko*) whether he would like to go with her to have a look at the basketball club's practice session so that perhaps he can learn something.<sup>3</sup>

図 1



A transcription and translation reads as follows (S=Sakuragi, H=Haruko):

H: /sakuragi kun // tʃotto ɕikan aru /  
(Sakuragi, got a minute?)

S: /haruko san/  
(Haruko!!)

H: /basuketto bu no kengaku ni ikimasen/  
(How about going to have a look at the basketball club training?)

H: /nanika jo:ɕi to ka aru nara are da kedo/  
(Unless of course you're busy or something...)

S: /nai/ /naissu/ /dzendzen/  
(No! Nope!! Not at all.)

From a gender-related point of view there are a number of interesting observations we can make from this very small extract. Firstly Haruko uses polite forms while Sakuragi doesn't. Thus she prefaces her suggestion to go to the basketball club with the question *chotto jikan aru?* (tʃotto ɕikan aru) rather than simply making the suggestion (which would be far more direct and

informal) and she follows it up with a face-saving device to prepare against refusal *nanika youji to ka...* (nanika jo:çji to ka...). She also uses the polite form *ikimassen?* (ikimassen) instead of the informal *ikanai?* (ikanai) whereas in contrast, Sakuragi responds with the informal *nai* (nai) as opposed to *arimassen* (arimassen) and the mild slang *naissu* (naissu) in order to emphasise his availability. While there are situations (for example in a work or other formal setting), where none of the language used by Haruko would be unnatural if spoken by a man, it is conventional for informal male/female conversations within their generation to follow the pattern established by Sakuragi and Haruko. We can also note a further convention whereby the former is referred to by his family name (with the informal suffix *kun* : kunn) while the latter is referred to by her first name (with the formal suffix *san* : san). If the conversation were reversed so that Haruko took Sakuragi's part and vice versa, we can suggest that while Haruko's polite language would not be particularly unnatural if spoken by Sakuragi (he is just being especially polite for some reason) the form *naissu* if used by Haruko would be marked and would be noted as an attempt to act tough by using a predominantly male form.

1.7 In our second extract we can examine the very informal language associated with a fight when Sakuragi is picked on by one of the third years in his first week of school and decides to fight back.

図 2



S: /iʃʃuun iki ga tomatte dzo/ /do: ʃite kuureru/  
(Right! You wined me for a moment there mate! What ya gonna do 'bout it?)

3rd yr1: /ua?/  
(Arghh)

3rd yr2: /nanda kora:/ /jannoka kora:/  
(What the...? Spunky bastard this one!!)

S: /ome: no iki mo tomete jaru/  
(I'm gonna stop your fucking breath too!)

3rd yr2: /jamero teme:/ /koko ɯa dokoda to omottenda/  
(Lay off 'im you wanker!! Where the hell do you think this is!!)

3rd yr1: /a:/  
(arghh!?)

S: /san nen sei no ko:ʃa/  
(The 3rd years' building.)

3rd yr2: /sono to:ri/  
(Er, got it in one!)

This language is of course somewhat problematic as regards producing a satisfactory translation. Japanese does not have emphatic expletives like English, and instead achieves the very strong emphasis of such forms by using slang versions of normal words and suffixes. Thus, for example, the suffix *zo* (dzo) in the first line sets the tone of the whole phrase: signifying extreme informality. Were we to repeat the same phrase but replacing the *zo* with the polite emphatic marker *no* (no) : *issun iki ga tomatta no* (iʃʃun iki ga tomatta no) we would have a phrase with a distinctly feminine character to it. Similarly, in the third line, the phrase *nanda kora* (nanda kora:) is an extreme form of the more polite *nan desu ka anata* (nan desu ka anata) which literally means 'What are you?'. The informality of the language is conveyed by the changing of grammatical forms and the substitution of different words rather than the English convention of adding emphatic taboo words. Once again, while women do indeed use such language in similar situations it is clear to all observers that they are deliberately using forms that are considered predominantly masculine for the effect that this produces. This is particularly clear with the different forms of 'you' seen in the next two lines: *ome-* (ome:) and *teme-* (teme:). The word *ome-* is an impolite form of the word 'you' which is often used by male superiors to their male inferiors in rank and age and also to their female peers. This usage gives a strong impression of male superiority, although most Japanese would simply regard it as a convention of language. Indeed, when used within the peer group to either male or female peers it conveys a greater sense of solidarity than it does superiority. Nevertheless, there is no question that this is a male form of the language which is rarely used by women and always suggests an 'acting tough' or even feminist stance when such usage does occur. This is similar to the effect created in this particular extract, where the fact that Sakuragi uses the form to his social superior (a third-year student) emphasises the confrontational nature of his language. The same comments can be applied to the form *teme-* which is an even stronger form of the word 'you' and found almost exclusively in fighting talk.

1.8 We can make a useful contrast with an extract depicting a female/female confrontation. Although this does not develop into a fight, this itself is perhaps a reflection of the stereotype that

is common in both western and Japanese culture, that boys are far more likely to resort to physical violence than girls. Here, some girls who are fans of one of the basketball team's star players (Rukawa: rukawā) are making fun of Sakuragi who has red hair and tries to match Rukawa's ability even though he is only a beginner (though an extremely talented one). Haruko comes to Sakuragi's defence.

図 3

## SLAM DUNK 3



Girl 1: /atama warui no jo/ /ano akai kami/ /mirja waru ōan/

(He's thick that redhead. You can tell by looking at him.)

Girl 2: /hen jo ne:/  
(Strange isn't he?)

Girl 1: /sore de itsumo rukawā kun ni hariau to fiten no jo ne/  
(And he's always trying to compete with Rukawa too.)

Girl 2: /kanau wake nai no ni/ /baka mitai/  
(Yeah, when he's got no chance. Stupid fool.)

Girl 3: /sassa to jametjaeba i: no ni/  
(Huh, he should just give it up.)

All: /ne:/  
(Yeah.)

Haruko: /tʃotto/ /anatataʃi/  
(Hey you lot.)

Girl: /e/  
(Hmm?)

Haruko: /so:ju: i:kata ūa joku nai ūa/  
(You shouldn't talk like that you know.)

Haruko: /iʃʃo:kenmei jatteru ōito ni taiʃite ʃitsurei deʃo:/  
(Don't you think it's rude to someone who's trying really hard?)

Girl2: /na/ /nani jo/  
(Wh...what's up with you?)

This extract demonstrates a lot of language which is very characteristically female. Indeed, it could only be uttered by a man who was trying to be deliberately camp. Firstly, the emphatic particles *no* (no) and *yo* (jo) when used in combination are quite clearly feminine, although both markers are used by men individually. Thus, while we could imagine a man saying *atama warui*

*no* (atama warui no) or *atama warui yo* (atama warui jo): the meaning being almost the same but with the latter being a stronger form, we could never imagine a man saying *atama warui no yo* (atama warui no jo). The same can be said of the combination of *yo* and *ne* which are also perfectly acceptable in isolation or when preceded by the informal form of the verb 'to be' (*da* : da), when used by a man, but clearly feminine (and therefore perhaps even cute) when used together in this way. Equally explicitly feminine are the contraction of the words *ja nai* (ɕa nai) into *jan* (ɕan), the addition of the syllable *cha* in the middle of a verb form and the single long drawn out utterance of agreement *ne* (ne:) which would be uttered in unison by all three girls with rising-falling intonation to show solidarity.

Haruko's challenge is notable for its polite language in comparison to the language seen above used by boys. The interruption *chotto* (tʃotto) literally means 'a little' and can be equated to something along the lines of 'you're a little out of line'. The emphatic particle *wa* (ɰa) clearly shows her displeasure, but it is a purely feminine form when used in this way, and we can make a similar judgment about the form *deshou* (deʃo:) compared to *darou* (daro:) which would be far more masculine. Finally, the girls who have been chastised by Haruko respond with bewilderment rather than anger and in fact they attempt to save face in the next frame simply by running away.

1.9 This female conversation is very typical and it reflects an observation made by Janet Holmes (1992: 331) about gossip in English by women that applies equally to the Japanese setting: "It's overall function for women is to affirm solidarity and maintain the social relationship between the women involved." Indeed, it is possible to argue that this desire to build solidarity above all else is actually far stronger among Japanese women than it is among English-speakers and the enormous number of markers of feminine conversation (of which only a few have appeared in this short extract) serve to underline that solidarity. Thus, for example, while Holmes draws attention to the cooperative and supportive nature of women's speech in English, there is no linguistic marker in English as emphatic as the Japanese women's *ne* which is pronounced in unison by all members of the conversing group, for precisely this purpose, at regular points throughout a discourse.

2.0 Taken together, although limitations of space have led to the presentation of only very short extracts and have allowed only very limited analysis, it seems clear that there is also justification for applying Maltz and Borker's (1982) judgment, that North American men and women come from different sociolinguistic subcultures, to the Japanese setting. The actual language used by the two groups plays an essential part in defining gender roles within the society and serves to reinforce both the images that the sexes have of each other, and the way in which they feel they should behave in different social situations. Although the focus here has been on the language of teenagers, these are in fact conclusions that can be generalised to the society as a whole and similar extracts could be produced that replicate the same features in an adult setting. We can suggest that there is a scale of markedness of use increasing as we move from socially neutral

Japanese to men's Japanese and then on to women's Japanese. Thus, while unmarked Japanese is available to all at all times, men's Japanese is available to women but such usage is heavily marked. Women's Japanese is unavailable to men in normal usage. On a grammatical scale however, it is in fact women's Japanese that is closer to the socially neutral register than men's Japanese. Thus we noted in the first extract that both men and women use the polite *masu* forms of verbs but that this is more common in informal situations by women and is markedly polite when used by men. This appears to match the common intuition about English famously voiced by Lakoff (1975) that women use more polite and indirect language than men. However, it must be emphasised that these conclusions have yet to be confirmed by the examination of a large corpus of data and that we can offer them only as hypotheses until such examination is undertaken.

### **Notes**

1. I am grateful to T. Kimura, T. Nonaka and A. Suarez for reading through an earlier draft of this paper and providing suggestions as to its improvement. Any errors of course remain the responsibility of myself.
2. I have adopted the system used by Kato et al. (1989) when transcribing the Japanese sound system into the phonetic script.
3. Japanese comics are read from right to left and from top to bottom. Frames in which there is no language have been omitted.

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